

The Customer Isn't Always Right

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The disagreement grew increasingly intense. His frustration was obvious as he angrily snapped, "I'm the customer! I'm always right!" I didn't yell back. I simply resigned his business.

"The customer is always right" is an outgrowth of the intense competition among early big-city retailers. 19th century titans like John Wanamaker and Marshall Field wisely emphasized customer satisfaction as a way to differentiate their department stores from their neighbors. In the decades that followed, the phrase became a common expectation that lives on today in many high-end retailers.

Unfortunately, it has also created an often-inappropriate sense of entitlement that excuses bad behavior. I'm certain anyone who has spent time in a client-service business such as ours has cringed as a client used it as a form of intimidation. Deferring to that kind of bullying does a disservice to both the client and the business.

I don't say that out of disrespect to clients. After all, we started our business to help other companies succeed by striving to deliver a higher standard of service. We have great respect for our clients and have developed friendly, long-term relationships with most of them.

Clients turn to us for help and counsel. They want to promote their businesses, their products, and their services. They know how competitive their marketplaces can be and they recognize the value our expertise can provide. Sometimes, they're facing challenges or roadblocks and aren't sure how to get past them. Often, the marketing world is completely foreign territory for them, and they just want someone to help them navigate and make the right choices.

Effective client-service relationships are built upon trust, and trust grows out of candor. It isn't always easy to be brutally honest with a client, but they deserve nothing less from us. Sure, we could tell them the website their cousin's son designed is just fine, but part of what they're paying us for is our honest professional opinion. When they suggest spending half their marketing budget on cable TV ads, we could nod and smile, but we owe it to them to explain why that probably isn't the most effective way to reach specifying engineers at aerospace manufacturers.

Clients know more about their products and services than we ever could. That makes sense, because they're immersed in that world. When they tell us a new design element represents a significant leap forward for their industry, we have no reason to doubt them. When they describe the engineering invested in solving a common customer problem, we're suitably impressed. They're the experts in their field.

And we're the experts in ours. We might not have a clue about how to engineer the type of solution they developed, but we know the most effective ways to share that solution with their target audiences. They're perfectly capable of setting up a booth in a trade show, but they don't know how to drive foot traffic into that booth or best leverage of all the extras available to exhibitors. They can write a check for a new website, but do they know how to measure how many people are visiting the site and what they've come to see? We do.

It can be difficult to admit you don't know everything, especially for people who have built their companies from the ground up. But there comes a time when you recognize the benefits of reaching for outside expertise. It's why you work with an accounting firm instead of trying to fill out your own tax forms, and why you ask your attorney to review contracts instead of trusting your ability to decipher them.

It's just as hard for service providers to tell you that you're wrong. People want to be liked. From an early age, we're taught that disagreeing with others or pointing it out when they make mistakes is impolite. But if you've hired us to look out for your best interests, we have to be candid. When we disagree with a strategy you've proposed or the way you want something on your website to appear, we're not saying you're a bad person. We're just trying to make sure the outside world sees you and your company in the best light.

The client who insisted his standing meant he was always in the right didn't like being challenged. I don't feel any anger toward him. I actually feel sorry for him because his unwillingness to take counsel will continue to limit his company's potential. But I learned long ago that I can't help people who believe they already have all the answers. So instead of wasting my expertise by trying to convince them otherwise, I'll politely step away and redirect my time and energy to clients who truly want to grow and succeed.

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